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Commentary on Philip Rose: “Dissensus and the Rhetorical Function of Humour”

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1. INTRODUCTION

There is some cognitive dissonance in juxtaposing critical argumentation and humor. Arguing to resolve dissensus is serious and important business. There does not seem to be much room for humor. At the same time, arguing to resolve dissensus is too serious and important for us to ignore anything in our rhetorical tool kits that can help. Humor is a very useful tool.

As paradoxes go, this one is not that perplexing. We know full well that the judicious use of humor can help ease the hostility in adversarial argumentation or win over audiences in formal presentations. There are no surprises here. However, there are some daunting roadblocks on the way to explaining how and why.

2. ARGUMENTS AND JOKES

For starters, arguments are such complex and multifaceted phenomena that it would be easy to get mired in the project of trying to define exactly what should count as argumentation. We already have two different models on the table: Is it the adversarial kind of argument we have in mind? Or is the paradigm someone making a case before an audience? Philip Rose manages to sidestep this problem rather deftly by keeping his focus on argumentation as a means to the resolution of dissensus rather than any other goal-oriented species of argumentation. What matters is the function, so implicitly adopting a functionalist methodology is enough. A functionalist *characterization* does not commit one to a functionalist *definition*. Accordingly, and despite his title, dialectical, rather than rhetorical, considerations move to the fore.

Humor is no less complex and multifaceted, and a similar danger presents itself: it would be easy to get lost in the inescapable thicket of trying to define humor. Rose avoids this trap, too. He explicitly recognizes the great diversity among kinds of humor. None of the common theories of humor can do justice to all the varied examples of humor, but all of them work like charms when applied to the right examples. Rose cites the superiority, relief, and incongruity theories, classically associated with Hobbes (1998), Freud (1993), and Schopenhauer (1958), respectively. But there are other theories he might have mentioned, if only because they would serve his purposes well. For example, Ted Cohen (1997, 1999) outlines an account that is more social-ethical than psychological; it

compares getting a joke with understanding a metaphor; and it emphasizes the communication of values and emotions over purely cognitive elements.

As was the case for arguments, at least some rough characterization of humor is needed in order to proceed. The quasi-functionalist approach served Rose well for arguments, and it has promise as an approach to humor. Rose has some definite functions in mind for humor to fill in the service of dissolving dissensus. Humor can be used to determine, reinforce, and create identities. To that end, Rose begins with the suggestion, as a working hypothesis, that “we think of humour as a form of play in the broad organic sense of that term.”

Even though this is just a starting point, not a complete analytic definition, it raises some red flags. First, some of the roles assigned to humor are more dialectical than rhetorical, but that is just terminological. Winning over the sympathy of an audience is clearly within the sphere of traditional rhetoric, but in order to determine the ethical identities of interlocutors in any meaningful way, we need extended exchanges. Second, it has curious counterintuitive consequences. Rose offers “peek-a-boo jokes” with an infant as an example meant to be included. I am a bit skeptical about counting peek-a-boo as a humor phenomenon – and very skeptical about counting it as a *joke*. Sure, there is laughter, and it is fun, but is it *funny*? Laughter and humor are not the same. I do not mean to pick on this example, but it betokens a third, more serious problem: connecting humor as characterized with the functions credited to it. When we play together, whether it is peek-a-boo or poker, we establish *community* more than individual *identity*. Granted, this is mostly a matter of relative emphasis because our identities consist in large measure of our community memberships, but it is important because communities can contain dissensus.

3. HUMOR, IDENTITY, AND COMMUNITY

In principle, there is a lot to be said for the idea of using humor for the purposes of recognition and identification. There is no question but that a shared sense of humor can be the basis for expanding communication and building further agreement, but there are many questions to address before it can be put into practice.

What is meant by the phrase, “a common sense of humor”? Does it mean finding the same things funny or the same *kinds* of things funny? Do two people with widely disparate political views, but each with an insatiable appetite for puns share a sense of humor? What about the political allies whose values are in lock-step, but whose tolerance for puns differ?

It must be the former (topics) not the latter (kinds) for the duty at hand, but even that is not enough. Two people who *would* find the same jokes funny (and in the same contexts) do not share a sense of humor in the relevant way *unless* the subjunctive counterfactual is turned into an indicative factual. Community happens not when we *would* or *could* share jokes, but when we *do* share jokes. We need more than a common sense of humor; we need a common *history* of humor experiences. It is not even enough that we have laughed at the same jokes; we must have laughed at the same jokes *together*. Would two political opponents who happened to attend and laugh at the same funny movie at the same time, but from different sections of the theater, feel differently about each other afterwards? Community requires something communal.

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So Rose is on the right track, but the comments about searching out identities have to be based on occasions in which humor is or is not *shared*. Identity can be dramatically established through difference, as when one person objects to an offensive joke that another person tells. Even someone's failure to find something funny can be a clue. However, to establish community rather than discover an identity requires shared humor – something like an ethnic joke that creates an *us* and a *them*, or a private joke that separates *insiders* from *outsiders*.

Many factors, both personal and social, complicate matters. There are complex power relations to take into account: objecting to your boss's jokes is harder than criticizing your children's jokes. There are also differences in personality. Some people are too polite to voice an objection or too timid to instigate a confrontation. It's not hard to remember or imagine situations in which someone Jewish or gay remained silent or even joined in the laughter at a joke about Jews or gays. And there is also the fact that we sometimes find jokes funny in spite of ourselves. I may be put off by a nasty joke targeting Democrats at the same that I find it so funny that I plan to use it on Republicans. In addition, there are questions concerning laughter and propriety – a shared sense of when it is appropriate to laugh or crack jokes. Laughter, like any other speech act or behavior, needs to be interpreted. Some people laugh out of politeness, habit, or nervousness in response to a joke, whether they get it or not. It is also entirely possible to get a joke without appreciating it. Just as laughter and humor need to be disentangled, so too do understanding a joke and finding it funny. And context matters. An incorrigible punster will eventually annoy even people who share all of her fundamental values – say, fellow party members or negotiating-team partners – but who are temperamentally less frivolous.

4. CONCLUSION

Rose's point remains, however, that even though inappropriate humor can create distance, humor can also bridge distances, because humor embodies values. It is similar to Jon Stewart's great insight about faith and the potential for religious leaders as agents of peace: Religion can be a powerful force for ending the wars – that religions have started.

That points to Rose's final and most compelling point: the potential for humor "to awaken a reflective attitude and to open up or disclose novel horizons and alternative possibilities." One thing that satire, for example, does so well is enable us to see things in a new light. Let me put that another way: we can *learn* something from a good joke, just as we can learn something from a good metaphor. However, what we can learn is generally not the sort of knowledge that fits into the canonical epistemological form, *S knows that p*, for discrete propositions, *p*. Rather, what we can gain is a kind of understanding. That is a far greater cognitive achievement than a mere increase in knowledge. It is also very often exactly what we need if we are to bridge the gap between different standpoints and make progress towards resolving dissensus.

[link to paper](#)

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